

CONSTRUCTING, NEGOTIATING, AND PERFORMING IDENTITIES AMONG
MEXICAN GAY MEN IN HOUSTON

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Homosexuality within Mexican culture remains a complicated subject and widespread source of oppression for many Mexican members of LGBTQ communities. More specifically, Mexican men who self-identify as gay often suppress their sexual identities to avoid hurtful confrontations with their family members. Fifteen in-depth interviews with Mexican gay men demonstrate how participants deployed a rich array of cultural resources to construct their ethnic and sexual identities in often hostile social terrains. Combining Ann Swidler's "cultural toolkit" framework with an intersectionality theoretical approach, this study demonstrated how Mexican gay men had navigated familial pressures, traditional notions of masculinity, and complicated relationships with religious teachings and institutions by utilizing pragmatic cultural tools and adaptive strategies of action to make sense of and affirm what it means to be both Mexican and gay in ways that affirm both identities. The findings offer intriguing insights on how ethnic and sexual minorities actively exploit resources from multiple cultural toolkits toward the task of constructing, negotiating, and performing multiple identities.

SEXUALITY, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY: MEXICAN GAY MEN IN THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD

Latinos make up at least 16% of the U.S. population and this number should continue to increase over time (Ellison, Acevedo, and Ramos-Wada 2011), hence it is crucial to learn and understand the social dynamics of this burgeoning American demographic. The fact that homosexuality within Mexican communities is considered a taboo, especially where there are strong traditional and conservative religious affiliations, causes many Mexicans who identify as gay to suppress their sexual identity to avoid hurtful confrontations with family members and a loss of status within their communities (Ballard 1996 and Bozett and Sussman 1990). But at the same time, immigrating to the United States offers Mexicans intriguing opportunities to renegotiate various aspects of their cultural worldview and self-perception through expanded access to a diverse array of symbolic resources they can utilize to make meaning of their Mexican ethnic heritage as it relates to multiple facets of their identities and experiences. In order to understand what Mexican homosexuals in the United States experience, it is important to analyze their challenges and triumphs with an approach that is sensitive to and curious about the complexities and tensions within their intersecting ethnic, sexual, and gendered identities.

The goal of this study is to investigate how Mexican gay men living in Houston utilize cultural resources to negotiate their multiple identities. More specifically, I am interested in the creative strategies Mexican gay men deploy to mitigate perceived conflicts and potential forms of marginalization they may encounter as vulnerable social actors in a diverse and complex American city. I will be using in-depth interviews as the only method in this investigation. The semi-structured format of the interviews provides participants generous opportunities to expound upon their personal experiences. From the interviews, I will utilize thematic analysis to identify important patterns. I anticipate my findings will unravel a deeper understanding of how multiple

identities (which are commonly referred to as positionalities) such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, immigration, education, and social class intersect in dynamic and complex ways as my subjects make sense of their lives and experiences in Houston. Since Houston is the 4th largest city in the United States and enjoys a diverse and multicultural population, it is important to understand how Mexican gay men navigate their intersecting identities while utilizing an assorted array of cultural assets at their disposal. While Houston is considered to be one of Texas's most liberal cities, the current U.S. political environment during the Trump Administration, (replete with antagonistic references and slurs against people of Mexican descent) makes it an interesting time to investigate how Mexican gay men make meaning of their intersecting identities in a major U.S. city.

Mexican and Gay

When attempting to understand how Mexican gay men express and experience their sexuality and the roles they play in various social arrangements, it is important to consider how the overall Mexican society perceives them and how Mexican cultural forces influence the way gay men construct and perceive their own sexual identities. Joseph Carrier's (1976) groundbreaking study explored how Mexican gay men strategically assume the more active position of penetrator as a means to safeguard their masculine identity. Carrier reveals the creative ways that gender roles intersect with masculinity codes to fashion a dominant male sexual persona as a safeguard against the marginalizing effects of feminine stereotypes of gay male identity. Carrier notes how Mexican culture signifies females as passive and pure, while associating males with aggressiveness, strength, and sexual fervency and thus, this activo/pasivo dichotomy informs the normative structure of gay male sexual relations. These values are represented and implemented by normalizing the sexual behavior of homosexual men who play

an active role during sex (Carrier 1976). Carrier's activo/pasivo model reinforces and interacts with the stigmatization of homosexual behavior, especially effeminate males who are marginalized for taking the pasivo role during sexual acts with other men.

While Mexican society is an important source for various strategies that Mexican gay men utilize to negotiate different facets of their identities, an important theme of my study assesses how American and European influences also provide cultural resources for men to negotiate and renegotiate their self-perception and identities. Accordingly, Hector Carrillo's (1999) study in Guadalajara introduced the term "hybrid culture" to talk about gay men who identify as gay and masculine. Guadalajara is an intriguing city for this study since it is considered a modern and liberal stronghold that quite paradoxically celebrates traditional and conservative values. Carrillo explicates how within this hybrid culture; traditional Mexican values converge with modern cultural changes to affect how people perceive homosexuality and sexual identity. Carrillo's participants were middle-class gay men from Guadalajara, many of whom lived a double life in order to navigate their sexual identity, maintain masculine status, and hold their cultural and traditional values in society. His findings revealed how men in Guadalajara who self-identify as gay may still try to pass as heterosexual in public spaces and present themselves in ways that meet the gendered expectations of Mexican society. Adding a supplemental component to Carrier's (1976) activo/pasivo binary, Carrillo introduces a third option concerning masculine sexual performance: "internacionales," men who assume both a pasivo and activo role during sexual intercourse (Carrillo 1999). It is important to refer back to Carrier's binary model of masculinity as an indication of the constraints of traditional Mexican values reflected in the construction of sexuality among men. In comparison to Carrier's inelastic model, Carrillo makes a strong distinction of how the term "internacionales" is formed as a way

to expose the globalized hybridity of cultural resources derived from European and American influences. In other words, this idea of hybrid culture is a result of a blend of cultural resources from their Mexican values and the outside influences due to globalization. Therefore, Carrillo helps us understand how we can expect diverse cultural resources to expand the options for Mexican gay men to construct and negotiate their understanding of meaning around their multiple identities.

Familism, Gender, and Religion

Community and family strongly impact how individuals socially and sexually develop (Ballard 1996 and Bozett and Sussman 1990). The interaction within the family is essential to establish values, norms, gender roles, and sexuality. Mexican culture consists of a robust family value system along with cultural and religious values that are imposed on members through the patriarchal family structure. While the family is a vital domain of social integration in most societies, earlier studies on Mexican culture and tradition go great lengths to accentuate the profound importance and regulatory power of family values towards constraining the identities of social actors. Steidel and Contreras (2003) depict familism as a cultural system that compels individuals to prioritize familial commitments and attachments over their personal needs, while strong family values, in turn, provide support and stability to individuals. Mexican culture is characterized as “allocentric” and collectivistic, where the emphasis on the group is more important than the individual, while the family is the most critical aspect of the community and Mexican identity (Guarnero 2007). The importance of family in Mexican culture is reinforced as the most durable bond between family members, where familial obligations override each members’ personal interest. Recognizing how familism promotes powerful beliefs and sentiments accentuating family honor and support, Perez and Cruess (2014) reveal the complex

ways familism diminishes amongst Mexican individuals who are highly assimilated to American values. This inverse relationship between familism and acculturation only highlights how familism is a salient facet of Mexican identity. But Perez and Cruess (2014) are clear to point out that even among acculturated Mexicans in the U.S., family still remains an important source of identity, comfort, and support. Due to their strong family ties, many gay men prefer to hide and suppress their sexual identity to protect their family honor and maintain harmonious relations with family members. Hence, it cannot be overstated how the structure of the family is an important regulatory and integrative force within Mexican culture and identity.

Men face different challenges based on the different characteristics of their identity and self-presentation. Feminine and masculine men who identify as gay may experience different responses to their sexuality from their families and ethnic communities (Carrier 1989). The shame associated with homosexuality is very present in the Mexican family. Even when gay men come out, they may be accepted or rejected but often the family deals with homosexuality using silence and ignoring the situation (Carrier 1989). Belinda Campos (2014) shows how the Mexican family structure continues to promote a hierarchy of gender values and norms, assigning greater status in leadership roles to men and boys while designating more nurturing assignments to women and girls such as caretaking and housekeeping. For example, Campos clarifies how the father's role is to support the family financially as he is perceived to be strong and manly, while the mother takes a more passive if not submissive role. Hence Campos confirms that the family remains an important site of gendered values instilled by Mexican culture and thus the family helps to define what it means to be female and male.

In addition to the family, gender roles are sharply defined and supported by religion and other social institutions. But perhaps the most enduring and pervasive influence on male and

gender identities pervades all spheres of Mexican life, and that is the cultural notion of machismo, defined as socially constructed and reinforced set of behaviors, comprising the content of male gender roles in Mexican society (Estrada, Rigali-Oiler, Arciniega, and Tracey 2011). In Mexican culture, machismo is often encouraged since it is the instilled gender characteristic of Mexican men. In important ways machismo structures how boys are socialized from birth to enjoy strong gender privileges that are reinforced by the culture and traditions of Mexican society. Girls are perceived as passive and delicate whereas boys are encouraged to be aggressive and repress any other behavior that may be associated with femininity. In addition, cultural values such as honor and courage are strongly enforced in boys growing up (Carrier 1976). Since machismo is an integral part of the Mexican culture, it is important to understand how Mexican gay men construct their meaning of machismo and how it plays a role in constructing their identity while living in the United States.

Other works explore intersectionality of gender and sexuality of gay Mexican living in the United States. Marysol Asencio (2011) investigates the negotiation of identities among gay men. Her thirty-seven interview subjects were raised in Puerto Rico and migrated to New York. Asencio found that most of the participants resisted feminine characteristics and showed hostility to effeminate gay men. In other words, her participants displayed a strong sense of hegemonic masculinity as a defense mechanism to avoid being stereotyped with their feminine gay counterparts who are particularly targeted for marginalization. Asencio's study demonstrates how Puerto Ricans negotiate multiple marginalized identities in the United States and how they strategically utilize cultural resources to navigate their identities in order to prevent further marginalization as immigrants in the United States.

Researchers from various disciplines assess how men from diverse backgrounds understand and construct masculinity while responding to its constraining influences. Peña-Talamantes (2013) studies how Latino gay college students construct masculine identities while negotiating both their understandings of the cultural expectations of machismo and their emergent collegian identities. Peña-Talamantes reveals how his subjects construct their own gay identities by appropriating the less violent and aggressive aspects of machismo with humanist values accentuating success, honor, education, and authority towards the formation of their gay male aesthetic. Peña-Talamantes coined the term “machoflexibility” to represent this intriguing middle ground between the effeminate-hypermasculine polarity of performative strategies. While gender roles are still strictly defined in Mexico, Carrillo’s (1999) notion of hyper culture along with Peña-Talamantes’ findings on machoflexibility demonstrate how Mexican gay men utilize cultural resources beyond traditional Mexican strictures of masculinity to creatively reformulate their masculine self-images as gay men. Therefore, more scholars need to explore how men use strategic cultural resources to prevent marginalization and stigmatization within their communities.

Carrillo and Hoffman (2018) discover how the idea of heterosexuality is reimagined by men who seek other men for sexual pleasure and still identify as straight men. In other words, many participants believe having sex with other men is just a sexual experience to satisfy their urges rather than an orientation that defines their identity. Once again, this takes us back to Carrier’s (1976) model of activo/pasivo which identifies the pasivo as an effeminate man firmly entrenched in gay identity; while the activo enjoys sexual encounters with men while maintaining a strong macho image or portraying himself as straight. Carrillo and Hoffman’s (2018) participants similarly rejected the notion of belonging to another sexual category that was

not straight; their sexual curiosity was justified by emphasizing their love of women, while secretly enjoying sexual experiences with men when women were not available to them. Aside from the hypermasculinity internalized in many Mexican from this study, it is important to also consider the negative connotation homosexuality has in Mexican culture that makes it difficult for gay men to construct their sexual identities without being hastily branded as effeminate or even rejected by society.

Another recent study reveals how bisexual Latino men wrestle with the fear of rejection and stigmas associated with homosexuality while they negotiate their sexual identity and the gender norms in their communities to construct their masculinity (Munoz-Laboy, Severson, Garcia, Parker, and Wilson 2018). It explores how bisexual Latino men manage two parts of their lives in order to fit the gender norms of society and their cultural values. The family expectations and gender roles are important when separating how their masculinity is performed at home and in their community. Many of the participants talk about keeping up with the image of being masculine and conforming to normative standards that dictate how men should act in society. Once again, we see societal prescriptions for masculinity serve as salient aspects of how Mexican gay men construct their sexual identity.

Besides the gender roles, machismo, and the strong emphasis on family, Mexican cultural values are strongly influenced by religion which continues to wield a strong presence within Mexican society. The association of strong affiliation to religion suggests individuals who view religion as an essential part of their life, might have negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Barbosa, Torres, Silva, and Khan 2009). Recognizing a strong correlation between homophobia and religious beliefs (Durell, Chiong, and Barrtle 2007), it is important to understand how

religion plays crucial roles within the formation of personal identities, traditions, and cultures in ways that present challenges for Mexican homosexuals. Therefore, as we've seen with family and gender, religion serves an important normative force within the formation of identity in Mexican communities.

Mexican Gay Men in the United States

Mexican gay men who move to the United States face different challenges than those who live in Mexico. Aside from battling their sexual identity, they need to find ways to negotiate their sexuality and their ethnic identity in the United States. In some ways, Mexican gay men have to negotiate what some scholars refer to as “triple oppression,” when they are not accepted due to their ethnic identity in the U.S, when they are rejected by Mexican family and friends due to their sexuality, and when they are discriminated by mainstream society due to their ethnic and sexual identities (Marsiglia 1998). Compared to the challenges gay men faced in Mexico, the obstacles men face in the United States can exponentially increase based on their multiple vantage points of oppression. Hence, it is important to understand how gay men navigate through these challenges and negotiate their identities living in the United States.

In addition to the obstacles and challenges Mexican gay men face in the U.S., it is important to acknowledge how access to American social spaces and cultural resources can also empower them to understand and navigate their intersecting identities. Moving to a country where homophobic values are prevalent but enjoy less institutional and societal reinforcement can provide Mexican gay men intriguing new ways to reconstruct and affirm their sexual status. So, even though their Mexican culture may project a negative understanding of their sexual identity, living in the United States may provide new social and cultural resources towards understanding and expressing their identities.

Researchers have been examining how religion, culture, and familism plays an important role in the coming out process (Connally and Wedemeyer 2013). The immigration process for many Mexican men is a challenge that has been extensively examined and analyzed in different social aspects. When considering the above-mentioned literature on familism and the construction of social norms in the Mexican culture, it is interesting to look at how these factors impact gay Mexican men and their coming out process in the United States. A study along the Mexico-U.S. border examined the coming out process for Mexican Americans living in rural communities and revealed that cultural and family values are more efficacious than self-acceptance within the LGB community (Connally and Wedemeyer 2013). As one might have predicted, close proximity to Mexico plays an important role in the construction of cultural and social norms. In a similar study, Carrillo and Epstein (2014) investigate the challenges Mexican gay immigrants in San Diego endure in relationship to their geographic origin. The study takes into consideration how being raised in rural areas is different than growing up in densely populated cities where it is common to have more liberal perspectives on LGBT issues and concerns. While a complex array of factors motivates gay men to immigrate to the U.S, the widespread stigmatization of homosexuality in Mexico plays a compelling part (Carrillo and Epstein 2014).

An even more relevant work to my proposed project is an ethnographic study in Los Angeles, Mexico City, and Cuernavaca that explores the intersecting identities among gay men in the United States (Thing 2010). This study is particularly significant because part of it is situated in Los Angeles which, like Houston, is one of the largest and most diverse cities in the United States. The study's findings suggest that the way participants construct their gay identities in Los Angeles has been affected by their social class and where they grew up in Mexico due to

the importance of access to education about homosexuality (Thing 2010). Just like other scholars have mentioned, geographic construction is important because socioeconomic factors strongly impact how homosexuality is perceived and understood. Even though Mexican gay men may share cultural and traditional values, where and how they were brought up affects how they construct their own masculinity and how they perceive different aspects of their sexuality. Sexual identities of the gay men in Los Angeles are perceived as “transnational intersectional” where different parts of their identities converge in ways that transcend their Mexican culture and values (Thing 2010). This results in a hybrid construction of the different identities Mexican gay men negotiate to enjoy solidarity and shared identities with other members of their community.

Intersectionality and Sexuality

The concept of intersectionality was first mentioned by feminist scholars who were trying to explain the social and economic positionality of women of color compared to white women (Anzaldua 1987; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991). It focuses on how the concurrent interactions of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexuality and the structures of oppression constructed around these identities affect how people perceive life and meaning in society, and more importantly how they experience multiple forms of inequality and oppression (Collins 2010). In other words, feminist scholars have used the intersectionality framework to show how one aspect of an individual’s identity such as gender or race does not adequately capture the complex social arrangements and challenges that an individual negotiates within multiple social contexts. In order to understand how systems of oppression that produce inequality work, it is important to identify how different social categories are experienced simultaneously (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991).

Ethnic oppression and homophobia combine to impact identity formation in critical ways (Thing 2010). When attempting to understand identity formation among Mexican gay men, fundamental social categories need to be examined through an intersectional approach. This is important to avoid limiting the focus on one aspect of oppression and positionality of Mexican gay men at the expense of others. For example, religion and religious beliefs are essential in the construction and regulation of social norms and the enforcement of normative sexualities in Mexico (Abdo, Brown, and Hof 2016). Consequently, religious identity is an important positionality to examine in conjunction with sexual identity since religion plays such an important part in the construction of normative ideas and values that are enforced in cultural and traditional values in society. In addition, Mexico is considered to be a religious country that upholds conservative and heteronormative values which may result in sexual oppression to the gay community. Therefore, any study of Mexican sexuality must strongly consider its intersections with religious norms and values. Thus, the intersectionality framework will not only provide me with the ability to understand Mexican gay men's positionality and multi-layered identities but will also help me understand how they navigate and construct the meaning of their identities and how sexuality intersects with other identities in formative and complex ways. I believe utilizing the intersectionality framework in combination with Ann Swidler's (1986; 2001) cultural toolkit theory will help me understand how Mexican gay men actively and creatively strategize and self-actualize to overcome challenges and deprivations they may face within their traditionally marginalized positionalities.

Swidler's Culture Toolkit

Swidler's approach perceives culture as a repertoire of shared symbols, rituals, stories, and other cultural elements that each individual use in different combination based on their

personal choice. Similarly, our cultural resources, just like the tools in a first aid kit, can be deployed pragmatically to fit the needs of different situations and social experiences. Swidler presents culture as something dynamic and widely available for individuals to manipulate to make meaning of various social situations and social identities. Her cultural toolkit approach assesses the complex discursive strategies that people implement on matters regarding love and their relationships to romantic fidelity (Swidler 2001). Utilizing her interviews with white middle-class American couples about love, romance, relationships, marriage, and divorce, Swidler shows how people make meaning of love using elements from their own tool kit to fit specific circumstances and situations. It is important to understand the notion of culture as a tool kit because each of us carries different tool kits based on our previous experiences, race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. More simply put, Swidler's approach informs the way social actors navigate their world as creative architects of meaning.

My study is trying to understand how Mexican gay men negotiate their ethnic, gender, and sexual positionalities by creatively utilizing tools from Mexican, American, and other cultural repertoires to make meaning of their experiences in Houston. Mexican gay men may have similar experiences and share similar aspects of their experiences, their cultural background and sexual experiences may demonstrate differences among this community. As Swidler (2001) claims, culture is not merely a tool kit, but it is comprised of different ideas, emotions, values, and other styles of actions based on how we see ourselves. I consider Swidler's cultural tool kit metaphor to be an excellent analytical framework to evaluate the strategic ways Mexican gay men organize their identities and the creative uses of culture in their experiences. Mexican gay men have different intersecting identities, their ethnicity, gender, sexuality, education, immigration, and social class. Since this study aims to understand how Mexican gay men

construct aspects of their identity and culture, this approach will help us understand how people from intersecting identities construct meaning.

METHODS

Research Design

The focus of this study IRB-approved study was to understand the experiences of Mexican gay men living in Houston, Texas. An exploratory design was used for this study due to the nature of the research and the evaluation of the Mexican' experiences. Due to the sensitivity of the subject, interviews were used to understand better and explore the participants' experiences. In my role as the interviewer, I was able to clarify any confusion or misunderstanding of any particular questions which can help provide more concrete results in the study and ask additional questions and obtain clarification on responses and concerns from the participants. In accordance with Rubin and Babbie's (2009) assertion that the interview process allows researchers to witness the participants' reactions and personalities in order to ask more questions based on their behavior, I was able to adjust and extend my inquiries based on their non-verbal reactions to each question.

Research Relationship

As I am a Mexican immigrant living in Houston, I understood there was a possibility of my identity and my background to affect my research. I distanced myself from my participants and the research in order for me to avoid assumptions or misconceptions about the concepts mentioned in this study. In addition, in order to establish a stronger relationship with my participants, I emphasized my role of "student" removing the "researcher" aspect of my role or status in the interaction. This helped me obtain a stronger connection with my participants which allowed them to drop their guard and feel more comfortable during the interview.

As the discussion from the literature indicates, any study on Mexican identity and sexuality will cover sensitive topics regarding family tensions and religious conflicts that may cause participants to relive painful experiences. So, as a researcher, since religion, sexuality, and

family relationship were sure to come up in the interviews, I had to be more conscious and sensitive about how my participants might feel about topics that may be difficult for some of them to broach. In order to avoid judgment or my own personal bias on certain topics, I stated the purpose of my study and clarified both how my questions helped to achieve the goal of my study and how I would utilize the data acquired.

Participants

A total of fifteen self-identified Mexican gay men from the city of Houston were recruited for this study. For the recruitment process, snowball sampling was used along with flyers posted in different locations around Houston. The flyers offered a summary of the study along with my contact information for people interested in participating. To be eligible to participate in the study, participants had to identify as Mexican and gay, between the ages of twenty to thirty years old, and currently live in Houston. The participants varied in age, from twenty-one to thirty years old. Out of the fifteen participants, only two participants were born in the U.S. and had parents born in Mexico. The rest of the participants were born in Mexico and came to the U.S. when they were children. I considered the education level of the participants an important aspect of their identity. Out of the fifteen participants, nine are high school graduates, six is an undergraduate student, one has a bachelor's degree, three had a Master's degree, and one participant had a law degree. In addition, ten out of the fifteen participants were working full or part-time and attending college at the same time. See Table 1 and 2 for a detailed description of the participants.

Data Collection

The interview process was intended to explore the experiences of gay Mexican men; therefore, open-ended questions were created covering different aspects of their lives. The

questions focused on areas such as childhood experiences, family relationships, coming out experience, religious beliefs, and the gay and Mexican communities in Houston. The identity of the participants was protected by choosing a pseudonym during the interview. All interviews were conducted in person and in English (some of the interviews did use some Spanish during the interview since Spanish was their native language). The participants determined the location of the interview. Some of the interviews were conducted at the participants' house, UH Library, coffee shops, and restaurants near the participant's location. Interviews lasted 40 to 70 minutes. Before the interview, participants filled out a questionnaire (See Appendix B) to obtain demographic information. The questionnaire included questions about age, occupation, nationality, parent's nationality, and education. A consent form (See Appendix A) was signed by every participant to ensure the individuals' consent for audio recording and using their interview in this study. Participants were not compensated for participating in this study. The interviews were conducted by the investigator who is bilingual and a 1.5-generation Mexican immigrant.

Data Analysis

I collected all the data from the semi-structured interviews. Utilizing semi-structured interviews gave me the opportunity to obtain a stronger understanding of how Mexican gay men understand and construct their identity. During my interviews, I had the opportunity to talk to my participants about their family, religion, friends, and community relationships in order to understand how they intersect with different aspects of my subject's lives and how they construct identity. In addition, I was able to explore how their lives and views have changed living in Mexico and moving to Houston. I tried to explore not only general thoughts about their life and aspects of their lives but more sensitive and challenging topics such as sexuality, coming out to their family, negative aspects of their sexuality in the U.S. and Mexico. In a sense, I wanted to

understand how Mexican gay men utilize cultural resources from their Mexican and now American culture to construct their identity in Houston.

The data was collected through one-on-one interviews in public areas or another location where they felt most comfortable. In each interview, each participant led the direction of the interview, some interviews were longer than others, but this was based on how comfortable and how willing each participant was to talk about their life experiences. The interviews were audio-taped with the obtained permission of each participant in order to properly and accurately transcribe and account for the interview. The audio was replayed for the data analysis process of this study. Anonymity was guaranteed to each participant before each interview. I performed open coding on all the interviews, I used axial coding to analyze all the data acquired. Codes started to emerge as I analyze the interviews extensively, themes started to emerge with the use of axial coding and the grouping of codes. Lastly, after grouping all the codes, four themes started to emerge which revealed the four main themes of this study.

Ethics

As a researcher, I am aware of the sensitivity and the topic and the importance of the Mexican values and cultural tradition including religious views regarding homosexuality, therefore, during my interview I maintained a respectful stance towards my participants' values and perceptions. Throughout all the interviews, I remained respectful and sensitive to personal anecdotes and beliefs regarding certain social issues. In addition, the findings and results presented in the next section, they are experiences and interpretations based on facts from all the interviews. During the interviews, I kept included all the information provided by participants leaving out any doubt of false information to be included in this study.

FINDINGS

The focus of this study involves how my participants construct meaning and navigate diverse and challenging social spaces as gay men living in a major U.S. city while sustaining familial, cultural, and religious ties to Mexico. Even as the interviews revealed a wide range of distinct experiences and perspectives, they indicated four important themes that adequately contextualize and clarify how the participants construct meaning to make sense out of their complex social identifies and experiences as ethnic and sexual minorities. These themes are family expectations, gender expectations, religion, and American culture. Through all the fifteen interviews in this study, participants shared compelling stories about their experiences as Mexican gay men in Houston. Many of them talked about their families and the challenges they faced being gay in their family. Participants shared their perspectives on the family and gender expectations contained within traditional Mexican notions of masculinity culture and discussed their own complicated relationship with religious institutions and values. Besides, some of the participants expressed how American culture provides resources to help them overcome challenges and hardships they face as a sexual minority. Overall, these themes are part of the construction of their identity they have created here in the United States.

Family and Gender Expectations

In Mexican communities, traditional values are reinforced within the family structure, as gender norms and values set expectations of how members should conduct themselves. In this study, all of the participants talked about the role traditional values played in their family and the expectations they encountered from parents and family members. In many instances, these expectations often conflicted with what they desired and believed was right. Participants described how family expectations were in place to pressure them to marry and start a family just

like the rest of their family members from past generations. Doing something different would be an infringement of the values their family members hold very close to their identity and belief system.

While participants alluded to times in their lives when they felt guilt, shame, and fear for failing to meet familial expectancies as gay men, they also discussed the many ways in which they resisted some of their families' values and gender norms, as Luis confirms when discussing his father's gender expectations for his son:

Luis: He was expecting his son to be a reflection of himself, I think. He grew up with a lot of brothers your typical Mexican men growing up; they drank, they smoked, they had many girlfriends. So that is just the culture that he was surrounded by. Moreover, even though we live here in the US, I think he still values those characteristics, and he wishes his son, his oldest son would carry his name. Like that is one thing that worries him, that I will not be able to carry his last name, that I won't be able to have kids of my own and keep the family's legacy.

As we can see, Luis believes his father subscribes to a clear notion of what a typical Mexican man should grow up to be which involves drinking and having many girls by your side to prove your virility. The machista characteristics Luis' dad embraces and wishes upon his son are all based on Mexican traditional values of Mexican masculinity, including the presumed responsibility for Luis to continue the family line by having his own children. Luis talks about how his father expects his son to emulate his father's behavior which can become a difficult expectation to fulfill because certain values of machismo are completely against Luis's own proper understanding of masculinity he continues to cultivate. As a result of the constant battle with his father's expectations and his own beliefs about manhood, Luis assembles a new understanding of masculinity that positively aligns with his identity.

So even though Luis grew up with Mexican values that indicate what it means to be a man, he has learned how to construct his own unique idea of manhood based on who he is and

what he wants to be. He enjoys support from his mother and seeks out common allies who face similar family dynamics for support. The constant battle with expectations sometimes drives Luis to stand his ground or isolate himself from his father in order to affirm his own values and identity. But in some contexts, Luis adopts a more conciliatory approach by managing, rather than defying, his family's expectations of how a man should act. For example, when he visits his family in Mexico, he bonds with his uncles by partaking in masculine activities like drinking and shooting, while refraining cooking because it is perceived as a woman's task (even though he enjoys cooking). Similarly, he handles his Mexican relatives' concerns for his unmarried status by insisting he is too focused on school to be tied down, rather than by offering a clearer picture of his status as a gay man. Luis has developed his own discernment concerning when and where to assert his own understanding of masculinity and when to appease his Mexican family members' gender expectations of him.

Like Luis, Oscar faces pressure from his family to conform to traditional notions of manhood. During our interview Oscar reveals some of his father's harsh appraisals in the context of the masculine expectations he imputes on his son:

Oscar: He told me that he was not going to have a fag in his family that he was going to be a joke for all his family members that I must be sick. That may be the school is making me have these gay thoughts and that I should just come home so he can fix me. That I should just start dating a girl to cure me the fag out of me.

Oscar goes on to explain how his gay identity brings shame to his family and brings pressure for him to conform to their expectations. Instead of acknowledging and affirming their son's sexuality, Oscar's parents treat being gay as a sickness to overcome or as a freely chosen preference to reevaluate. Oscar struggled as a kid with his father's expectations to play soccer or engage in more physical activities because he preferred dancing, singing, and watching musicals with his cousins. Crumbling under the weight of family pressures to display more traditional

manifestations of Mexican masculinity, Oscar eventually rejected their expectations and pursued his own passion in music. After coming out to his family, his mother supported him, but his father remained unsupportive of his son's sexuality. Oscar strategically averted conflict by avoiding the topic of his sexual orientation in his father's presence and by moving to Austin for college where he is able to explore his sexuality without confronting the strict expectations from his father.

As we have seen with Oscar and other participants, some Mexican gay men decide to move and create distance in order to maintain a harmonious relationship with their family and avoid problems. For others, like Juan, the stress and psychological discomfort of family expectations can drive them to hide their same-sex orientation, as Juan reveals:

Juan: And especially like when you grew up in a family that is very "machista" where my dad and my grandparents have been very close-minded where the man has to work, the men have to be manly dressed up in jeans with the big belt buckle and women need to wear dresses and skirts. I feel like has time passed, like I guess like the solution to all of these restrictions and confusion was for me to get into this closet. In a sense, the closet was my safe space where I could just hide who I was because I knew, no matter what, my parents will never accept me the way I am or who I am.

Juan further explains how his family expected him to dress a certain way and follow in his father's and grandfather's footsteps as Mexican men. He remembers how the "machista" demands from his family were so overwhelming that they eventually drove him out of the closet to disclose his sexual orientation to his family. Even after coming out, Juan still carefully monitored the way he dressed and talked around his family to avoid being subjected to homophobic quips. Since his parents are not accepting of his sexuality, like many other participants, he created an alternative life where he can be free around his gay friends and express his sexuality as a fun-loving young man.

Juan gradually began to stand up for his beliefs and own values about his sexuality and notions of manhood to his parents by talking to them about who he is and his fear of not being accepted. Even though his other brothers have followed his father's expectations, Juan keeps true to himself even if it means defying his mother's values by doing things he likes. For example, when Juan started wearing an earring, his mother was so ashamed that she didn't want him to visit his grandmother due to what she perceived as his feminine appearance. Instead of shrinking back, Juan explained to his mother how an earring won't make him any less of a man. Juan now takes a more active approach by being upfront about his sexuality and is unafraid to respond to family pressures by articulating his own understanding of manhood. Juan's gradual journey from closeted passivity to his more recent assertiveness in affirming his sexuality and aesthetic choices helps us understand how gay Mexican men utilize their cultural resources in various ways in order to navigate through the challenges imposed by their family expectations.

In Mexican culture, the idea of masculinity can often be a challenge for many gay men trying to find their identity (Carrier 1985). For many of the participants, their families pressured them to get married and start their own family; expectations that generated feelings of guilt and shame for failing to live up to that standard. For Camilo, this pressure was particularly salient because it was packaged in his mother's desperate plea for grandchildren from her only son:

Camilo: Because she said that I was her only son, who was ever going to give her grandchildren and that I was going to take that away from her, like because I was not going to have children, I was not giving her the opportunity to be a grandmother. She made me feel like I was taking away something she could never get back and that filled me up with guilt and fear of my own decisions and my own sexual identity.

When their parents talked about these expectations and the roles they had to play within the family, some participants used the mechanism of hiding their sexual identity based on the pressure and the policing of norms their parents had about their gender and sexuality role within

this hierarchical system. Others made early attempts to give in to familial and societal expectations in the hope of avoiding being ostracized, bullied, or questioned about their sexuality. Alberto practiced making his voice lower because he understood how his high-pitch voice had implications concerning the way his peers in school perceived him. Like Alberto, Luis also remembers a time in his youth when he conformed to masculinity expectations in order to fit in, as he recalls, “Like, I would talk to girls and try to just come out as masculine as possible,” and he also began intimidating other boys in school in to the expectation to be manly and strong. Other participants admitted to at one time or another resorting to dating women and exhibiting the kinds of masculine traits their families and peers expected to see in them as a way of coping with the distress of negotiating their sexual identity with the demands of their ethnic identity.

Some of the participants found it challenging to manage their own budding interests and aesthetic tastes against the backdrop of societal misperceptions of gay men as wanting to be women or necessarily feminine. Accordingly, Raul takes umbrage with the casual way people link homosexuality with femininity:

Raul: I feel it is weird because I feel like even though I do like guys, like at the same time I am not feminine. So, it is like, I feel like I did not belong in the boat. So, it is because like usually like people; they have an idea that gives you a gay like we were going to be like feminine. You were dressed up as a girl, like stuff like that. Well, like I said like I feel people talk about the gay community as like we are all feminine and are weak in a way. I never really belonged to that group; I feel like I am very masculine so sometimes it does bother me how people perceive what gay is.

Here we can see how Raul believes people pigeonhole gay men as necessarily weak and feminine, a caricature he adamantly rejects. Instead, Raul embraces his own version of gay masculinity that contradicts what he perceives as society’s one-dimensional assessment of gay femininity. He seems proud of the fact that people have a hard time believing he is gay since he does not fit their impression of how gay men should look and conduct themselves. Raul feels he

does not fit the mold of gay constructed by society, and in return, he constructs a very unique definition and meaning of what he feels gay is to him. I even noticed during our interview that Raul maintained a very strong posture and presence which gave off an air of confidence.

Like Raul, other participants negotiate the weight of societal misperceptions about gay masculinity, even from family members, as Oscar recalls:

Oscar: Negatively I feel like the way that my dad perceives me is very different. He views me now as feminine and weak. He associates gay with femininity and straight with masculine and strong. I have noticed he now sees me differently than before; he really does not involve me in any of his activities and assumes I am not interested or that I don't like what he does. Also, I have noticed he kind of like insinuates for me to hang out with my mom instead. Like if somehow, I will enjoy cooking and cleaning way more than doing manual labor.

Oscar talks about how his father now wants him to do chores with his mom insinuating that now his role should be that of a woman by staying home and doing wife duties with his mother. But like many gay men develop as they mature, Oscar cultivated a refined facility to navigate the gender expectations from society and his family and to employ different identities based on his environment and who he is around. When he visits his parents, he tries to be more private and keep to himself, but even though he chooses to keep part of his sexuality private, he does not see this as a denial of his identity, but instead as a wise compromise to get along with his father. Similar to Luis, Oscar utilizes his diverse culture tool kit in order to make meaning of who he is based on his environment, and he chooses to utilize certain cultural resources in a strategic manner in order to make meaning of who he is in different situations.

Alberto best represents the diversity that comes with piecing together his own unique brand of masculinity. On the one hand, Alberto appears to embrace some of the attributes often celebrated in societal depictions of masculinity. During our interview, he joked about how much he loves his big arms and how they boost his self-esteem and expressed concern about how long

our interview would take because he did not want to interrupt his gym routine to which he was very dedicated. He is a tall muscular man who works out religiously and drinks protein shakes to enhance his physique. His imposing physicality is something he celebrates and enhances. But on the other hand, Alberto also has aspects to his persona that he knows others perceive as feminine. Alberto grew up understanding that feminine behavior was bad behavior, it was not acceptable by their families or society:

Alberto: When I was growing up at that age, no one had been out. So, uh, there was no one to tease that they were gay, but they would use gay as an insult, or they would be like, if you had some behavior, even if they didn't know you were gay, they would be like, oh my God, you are gay. They would tease the boy with like gay behavior, you mean like feminine like sometimes being like feminine or just, yeah, we are too sensitive or not tough.

Alberto also discussed having a tough time during middle school due to his high pitch voice and feminine mannerism. But in high school, Alberto stopped worrying about how others perceived him and began defying traditional masculine standards. He became open and upfront about his sexuality joined the cheerleading team and began flaunting his admiration for female K-pop artists for their smooth skin and feminine features. Alberto is now aware that some of his traits resemble Mexican standards for masculinity while other aspects of his personal style go against many Mexican traditions and values that shape gender expectations. As a free agent of sorts, he engages the social world around him by constructing a unique meaning to what he believes it means to be gay and freely selects certain traits and characteristics that fit his tastes and interests whether they are perceived as masculine or feminine. Fittingly, this heightened sense of agency helps Alberto to find creative ways to share common ground with family members, particularly his father, but on his terms:

Alberto: Well, my dad also has a fish tank, but his hobbies are more like doing manual things like kind of work, like stuff with tools and I hate that. It's like we share some things but not enough to talk and have like good conversations about our lives and our

experiences. He loves sports like soccer but that's not for me, so instead, we just play tennis together which he doesn't mind.

Instead of conforming to his father's interests in soccer and manual work, Alberto spends time with his dad playing the sport of his choice.

Mexican gay men actively reconstruct meanings and values based on the social context and social situation. They utilize their rich cultural repertoires to make meaning of the important aspects that help them construct their identities and navigate through social situations. Even though most of the participants appear to be comfortable with their sexuality and embrace their sexual and ethnic identities, they all have different perceptions and ways of constructing and perceiving masculinity, which remain in conversation with (and contestation against) the traditional Mexican values and expectations that continue to be part of their families and environments. As a result, the participants display diverse and complex perceptions of how masculinity codes intersect with strategies of action as gay men. At one time or another, many of the participants tried to convince themselves of how their masculinity is still intact regardless of their sexuality. One participant believes he does not fit in with the feminine sectors of the gay community because he thinks of himself as a masculine gay man. Other participants gauged that masculine homosexuals are more popular in the gay community and that the more straight you are or the more masculine you look like, the more attention you may receive from the gay community. Their evaluations of their own community demonstrate how to some degree they buy into mainstream privileged notions of masculinity, especially with the fact that some participants considered that feminine gay men may have a harder time fitting in and may be bullied by other gay men due to their feminine characteristics which may place them in a more vulnerable situation. Considering their own complicated relationship to masculinity codes, it is important to understand the complex and contradictory ways Mexican gay men construct

meaning and define their sexual and gender identities based on their cultural experiences and the cultural tools obtained from those experiences.

Religion

Religion remains an important part of Mexican culture and identity so it is not surprising that it would be a widely discussed theme in the interviews, especially when participants recalled their fears about revealing their sexuality to family members. While the coming out process itself comes with requisite challenges, the participants reveal how one source of hesitation derives from the fear that some of their very religious family members might find their same-sex orientation troubling. In this way religion is a common source of anxiety for Mexican gay men, as the following quote from Oscar demonstrates:

Oscar: I know people might think like if you told your parents, what makes you so scared to tell your extended family. The more I think about it like I don't want to like break anyone's heart, especially like my grandparents. They are so religious and conservative I don't want to be that person that makes them sad or makes them sick, so I do feel like I would feel very guilty just talking about my sexuality in Mexico.

Oscar was one of many participants to acknowledge some degree of guilt for the turmoil that revealing their sexuality to religious family members may cause, while others learned firsthand how religious perspectives on sexuality can create divisions with loved ones that are difficult to mend. Gabriel recalls losing Protestant and Catholic friends who simply “stopped talking to me after coming out and that hurt.” Omar and others noted their experience with intense social pressures from family members to conform to their traditional religious standards. Most of the participants listed religion as a major source of psychological stress and disruption within social relationships. Because of its looming presence in Mexican identity and culture, it is important to understand how the participants make sense of religion in both their social relationships as well as in the context of constructing and affirming their own sexual identity.

My findings reveal how, despite the many challenges they face from social pressures rooted in religious institutions, traditions, and practices, the participants utilize a variety of cultural resources and strategies to reinterpret religion in ways that affirm their sexuality. In this way, Alberto embraces aspects of religion that coincide with his own values, while rejecting institutional components he dislikes:

Alberto: Hm. I don't like religion, but, well I don't like the institution of the church and sometimes religion, like most of the time religion goes hand in hand with that. But I feel like just like the church I can pick out certain things about religion that I like and just stick with that. I really don't care for the institution of religion like church and priests, but I do believe in something if that makes sense. Yeah, like I guess I can pick whatever part of that religion is appropriate for me and was healthy for me. So, like I don't believe in like the church, but I believe in God so, and I wouldn't go to like, I don't go to church anymore. We wouldn't want to, and I don't want my children to go to church.

Alberto still considers himself a religious person and yet does not put faith in religion as an institution. Instead, he chooses to serve God on his own terms in a way that affirms and aligns with his sexuality. Like Alberto, Juan also utilizes his agency to reconstruct his understanding of certain aspects of his identity:

Juan: I believe in God. I believe in the Virgin Mary. I feel like there's this one person that kind of oversees our lives and takes cares of us and loves us and supports us. But I'm very open-minded in that aspect as well because like things like you can't eat meat or I don't know, I feel like I visualize it. Like not eating meat is not, is more like not criticizing people like not eating people in a way. Um, because the Bible, you can interpret the Bible in many ways. So, I take it more from my own personal interpretation, like not hurt people. I take it like not hurting them, but then like they'd take it to like not eating red meat. But I feel like it's up to the interpretation of whoever reads the Bible. So, I feel like my family takes religion from a more traditional way, and I kind of take it from my own interpretation even though I believe in God, but I know like I believe in God and I believe that God is with me and that I'm with God. But in my own way, like not going to church every day.

It is important to note here how Juan contrasts his family's traditional approach to religion with his own more flexible approach that sees the Bible not as a rigid rulebook but rather as a source of principles that can be interpreted in multiple ways. During the interview, Juan also

differentiates his strict adherence to church rituals and traditions during his earlier years growing up in Mexico from the more flexible approach to religion he began to enjoy after he learned to embrace his sexuality. Thus, affirming his gay identity led Juan to perceive and practice religion in ways that align more with his self-perception as a homosexual person who believes in God. This is an important point to underscore in light of Juan and other participants' admission that many of the religious values their families impose on them can be quite hostile to their sexual identity, leading some to feel guilty and ashamed because of their sexuality due to the strict rules and normative structures religious institutions impose. From the participants' complicated relationships with religious institutions and doctrinal constraints we gain understanding on how some gay men learn to mitigate potential guilt and shame by reinterpreting religion to fit their gay identity, as another quote from Juan demonstrates:

Juan: [R]ecently like I watched this documentary where the pope was like talking about how equality and same-sex marriage is more of equal rights, more of a progressive view. And I feel like that's right because I feel God is not going to like to punish you for being different because you have a different sexual preference. I feel human beings and to be humanistic, it's in all aspects like bringing equality to races, body shapes, sexual orientation to like to be humanistic too. Like just appreciate people. That's what makes you love who you are. Like I am very proud of who I am. I am proud to be Mexican. Um, I just love Mexico. I love how I was raised, my culture. And I don't think that because I'm gay, I'm failing to be a Mexican or to follow my culture.

Whereas Catholic doctrine portrays homosexuality as a sin, from the above quote we see that Juan interprets religion from a more liberal and gay-affirming perspective and embraces a God who loves everyone equally, despite their sexual preferences. Through Juan's inclusive reframing of Catholicism, he gains confidence and pride in his Mexican and gay identities instead of seeing the two in conflict.

Several other participants touched on how their reinterpretations of Catholicism helps them to enfold the culturally nourishing and spiritually empowering aspects of their faith in ways

that allow them to affirm their Mexican identity while alleviating the shame that comes from traditional religious prohibitions against homosexuality. This is quite an accomplishment when considering how participants constructed of their gay identity in traditional religious environments where heterosexual values and norms of hypermasculinity are associated with being a man. Due to the constant shame, guilt, and condemnations they faced in religious institutions and from the judgments of religious family members, Mexican gay men confront the challenge of renegotiating their religious beliefs, while distancing themselves from religious institutions and often family members, as the following quote from Omar demonstrates:

Omar: I guess like growing up my family was very religious, we really have a strong love for the Virgin Mary, and I feel like that hasn't gone away even though like I feel now even though my parents don't fully accept me, religion does play in important role in my life. There are times where you know religion might be one of the reasons why I really don't talk to my extended family, since my extended family like my grandparents are very religious. They go to church and I guess like in church you know they talk about how homosexuality is immoral and it's a sin. I guess like now that I live away, my dad and my mom they do remind me like to go to church and they still try to like impose religion on me. But I feel like they've almost like accept it that my beliefs have change and that I have gained like new values in a way. I feel like it makes them sad because I still believe in religion and I still feel someone is always taking care of us, but I don't believe in the institution. So, at this point, like my stand on religion is very neutral and I really don't follow, or I am like I am not against a lot of the tradition since it is part of my identity in a way.

We see how Omar understands that his family is very religious and that the religious values they uphold will always prevent family members from accepting his sexuality. Even as his parents try to impose and reinforce their religious values by pushing him to go to church and making him feel guilty for not attending or being a good Catholic, Omar remains resolute in his lukewarm stance to the institution of religion. But as with Juan and others, Omar's reevaluation of religion allows him to preserve religious cultural resources that are crucial to upholding his Mexican identity. And thus, he negotiates the religious, ethnic, and sexual dimensions to his humanity in a self-affirming way.

Gabriel similarly deploys a selective approach to religion. In his interview, he discusses his profound respect for ways in which religion and spirituality enrich human lives, while he discards traditional religious constraints that attempt “to limit people from being who they are in terms of sexual orientation.” Like most of the participants, Gabriel grew up with strong connections to religious institutions, practices, but after coming out he distanced himself from traditional religious institutions. Even though Gabriel still considers himself to be a religious or spiritual person, he refuses to abide by institutional values that do not accept his sexual identity.

The participants demonstrate how Mexican gay men utilize strategic tools to reconstruct important aspects to create a balance between their spiritual and sexual identities in a way that does not alienate the participants from embracing their Mexican heritage. Instead of functioning as passive receptacles of religious doctrines and abiding to traditional institutional values, the participants actively construct creative interpretations of God and spirituality in ways that relieve perceived conflicts between religious truths and their homosexual orientation. Also, we have seen several participants reject religious institutions while encompassing the spiritual and cultural aspects of religion that support and invigorate their Mexican identity. The role religion plays in the participants' lives becomes an important factor in how they reconstruct the meaning of what religiosity means to participants based on their experience of living in the United States and holding their Mexican values and traditions. In this way, Raul's experience in the United States not only informs the manner in which he renegotiates his religious commitments and values but also helps to shape his perception and critique of the intersection of Mexican religious and ethnic identities, as the following excerpt exhibits:

Raul: Um, well like I guess religion is defined differently by people. Like in my life, religion was somewhat of a big deal but, now, like we are not very religious here in the US. But I do respect people and what they believe. I personally, I am not religious just because I feel like it does not protect everyone, in the contrary, I feel like it divides

people to like take sides and misinterpret a book that is so old and like it's just a book. I know my extended family is religious, like my grandparents and uncles like we have this thing of going to church every Sunday. Of course, like I feel like religion is essential and a big part of the Mexican culture. But here, like we are so busy that religion is not really a priority, so we prioritized other things like work and school. I know I guess people might think it's not nice or like okay to not be religious in Mexico, but I think it's okay to not be religious here in the US.

It is important to consider how American cultural tools are implemented in how Raul re-constructs what religion means to him. Raul seems to deploy American individualism when he describes religion as something uniquely interpreted by each person rather than as traditions to be rigorously obeyed. For Raul, religion changed when he moved to the United States by providing him with a modern cultural toolkit emphasizing individuality and choice. Accordingly, religion now for Raul no longer occupies a high priority in his everyday life, instead, he prioritizes school and work. Even though religion remains an important part of his Mexican identity, Raul's modern cultural toolkit allows him to prioritize other parts of his identity to reinforce his multiple identities and highlights the importance that American culture plays in how my participants renegotiate their sexual and ethnic identities.

American Culture

After coming out to their families, many of the participants talked about living on their own and not practicing many of their families' traditions like they would in Mexico. Out of the fifteen participants, thirteen of the participants were born and raised in Mexico until the average age of ten years old. The immigration journeys many participants talked about were reflected when they mentioned about how they felt about the Mexican gay community in Houston. However, most importantly, most of the participants mentioned how they did not follow certain Mexican traditions as they did in Mexico, instead, they acquired new traditions and followed more of the blended Mexican American cultural tool, as Mario's comment demonstrates:

Mario: Um, but I think the main difference is how receptive we are of the media messages we get from being on how to be gay. It doesn't create a how to be gay manual. It all comes from the States. Like, you know, there's a Ru Paul's drag race, which is ultimately the Bible for gays. Like we, we got a new vocabulary on how to interact with each other. Thanks to that show. It's easy to see that in LA. But if you go to Mexico is still the same shit. I'm like, okay. So, where I thought there were different and then if you go to Spain is like go ahead. It's totally different. They have their own things their own shows, their own vocabulary, their own ways of being and I feel like Mexican gays, are trying to be like the US gays, I don't know. Like I feel the media influences culture so much that like how the gay behave here in the US is like a model and the gays in Mexico try to act like them and try to understand the culture through media. That was my impression.

In Mario's experience, we can clearly note the significance of how American and Mexican cultures combine to form a new way of perceiving and constructing meaning towards his own sexual identity. Mario alludes to an important component of American culture in terms of the ways media offers gay men symbolic resources and safe spaces to rediscover and retool their sexual identity. In the above quote, his allusion to Ru Paul confirms the dramatic impact media have not just in the United States, but in international markets. Ru Paul is not just an American celebrity, but also enjoys broader popularity in the LGBTQ community as an international symbol that helps individuals construct meaning and perceive what being gay can mean to different people.

Another important point Mario mentioned was the importance of culture in how he constructs this "model" of what gay is based on the construction the American media has created. Based on the different experiences and the different countries Mario has lived in, it is interesting to see how he constructs a unique perception of what gay means, to the point that he feels it is unbelievable how gays in Mexico just want to follow the American gay culture by adapting and replicating what they believe gay means. Other participants confirmed the tremendous impact American celebrities and media outlets have in other countries like Mexico. It is important to consider how gay Mexican men in Houston can experiment with new ideas,

styles, and interpretations from two cultures to construct and reconstitute what being gay means with broader access to symbolic resources. American culture plays big in the mindsets of many participants as a repository of cultural resources in the construction of their sexual identity. For several participants, being gay goes beyond a limited notion of manhood based on Mexican masculinity codes, thanks to their international exposure to other gay communities around the world.

The following quote from Luis confirms how a broader cultural toolkit helps gay Mexican men construct a more complex and unique perception of their sexual and ethnic identities:

Luis: I feel like just how I struggle, like piercing my ears, you know, because I just thought it was cool and I just thought it was something that I just wanted to do because a lot of kids from my high school were doing it. My dad perceived that as something feminine and he perceived that as not Mexican enough that was not accepted in the Mexican household. My parents are just very traditional, and I feel like, I mean we'd been living here in the US for over 20 years and like I feel like we, even though we lived here for that long, like the American values will never replace what my parents grew up with. You know, the belief system of how we are supposed to grow up, work hard, get married, have kids, um, and men must have a woman that will cook for him and feed him and he would just, he has to be this strong person that will carry the last name and bring honor to the family in that way. So, like how that's valued, it's very different than what is valued here in America or in the US, like individuality is valued and how like you go to college and you'll become who you want, not what other people want or what your family wants.

As Luis mentions, it is important to understand how living in the United States and acquiring American values has transformed and helped participants reconstruct their meanings about important aspects of their lives. Luis contrasts the frustration he feels about his Mexican American identity and associated expectations from his family and the American understandings of freedom and individuality he grew to embrace. This reflects the bicultural battle some individuals face and how they have multiple cultural assets at their disposal to interpret the social world around them. For Luis, education has been his priority, as he mentioned how his family

moved from Mexico to have a better future, to be someone better and he strongly believes he can achieve that by pursuing his dreams and going to college. Based on his American values, he is a successful young man who has graduated from college and has started a great life. But, to the Mexican values that his parents impose and the traditional expectations they have, they are ashamed and feel guilty that their son loss his way and has chosen to live a life of sin being gay.

Mario exhibits a more integrative approach in terms of how he incorporates and appreciates both Mexican and American sensibilities:

Mario: Well I feel like I am all over the place. I don't know where to go. Uh, I feel like I, I'm not going to choose, I'm not going to put myself in to that burden of choosing one side or the other. I embrace both. I embraced that Mexicans are trying to look for their own identity, a mix and that puts me in that part. I embrace my American identity and being more open and being more out there because I know that Mexico, there's still a lot of the machista mentality, there's a lot of self-hating processes along gays and the US helps you navigate through that. I know I'm not going to generalize over the whole United States because it's different, you know. But like here in Houston I feel it's pretty common to see gay people in the street and kissing each other and you know, holding hands. You don't see that as you grow up as much. But I embraced both like when I had a boyfriend, I would hold hands with him and I'd be like, you know, we could be the only couple in all of this street but we're making a statement and that's, that's good.

The international experience Mario had during his stint in college helped him explore and understand his Mexican American identity. Growing in Mexico, Mario grew up in a very traditional household. He was not exposed to sexuality since it was a topic that his parents did not choose to talk about. He initially explored his sexuality during college which facilitated his sexual exploration and helped him understand his sexual identity. He encompasses symbolic tools from his Mexican and American cultural toolkits and relishes the increased optionality that accessing resources from both cultures brings, which facilitates the construction of his sexual identity. Like a pragmatic cultural “construction” worker, Mario chooses the appropriate cultural tool to fit each particular need.

If machismo in Mexico creates a dangerous environment for gay men to be around, due to the gendered values Mexico strongly imposes on their society, then increased access to cultural resources from their American toolkits can help gay Mexicans to reconstruct important parts of their identity to align with their sexuality. Some of the participants talked about their family visits in Mexico and how that has changed after coming out or accepting their sexuality. as the following quote from Alberto demonstrates:

Alberto I know that, Mexico, especially in a city that my family lives in, the one that I visit, it's a very, um, like a small town they like, I guess it's not a big city like being gay is seen as weird and dangerous. Like any, any identity on the LGBTQ would be seen as bad there in that town. And it's evident by like everyone on like Grinder and stuff. They're always like on private like that they never show their face and stuff. Which is something that I thought it was weird, when I visit Zamora, the small town I am talking about, I use the app Grinder which is a dating app for gay men, and most of the guys are super private and rarely upload pictures of themselves. So, I can see how growing up in a small Mexican town can be a very different experience.

Since Alberto comes from a very small conservative town in Mexico, he now compares how being gay in Mexico can be a difficult experience dealing with a conservative small town. He uses the dating app Grinder when he visits Mexico and notices how many of the profiles in Mexico do not show a profile picture to keep their identity anonymous. This makes him compare how living in the United States provides him a more liberal space for him to express his sexual identity and embrace his ethnic identity as well. Since he moved to the United States as a young boy, he acquired a lot of the American cultural resources which he claims has helped him to endure many of the challenges his Mexican identity brings regarding his sexuality. Both, his American and Mexican identity provide Alberto with diverse cultural resources that he can employ at different social situations to reconstruct the meaning of his identity.

Several of the participants talked about their struggle accepting their sexuality and how failing to meet familial expectations left them exasperated, depressed, and guilty. Many of the

participants talk about their mental health and how the challenges facing their sexuality led them to feel depressed and guilty about failing their family expectations. During his interview, Oscar talks about going to therapy to help him cope with the problems coming out caused to his family. He mentioned how mental health was not considered something important or therapy was not something that people believe in Mexico, so he was very hesitant to go to therapy. Other participants expressed the constant battle between the Mexican and American values in regard to the perspectives and resources they provide toward negotiating their sexuality. Since many of the participants were brought to the United States as children, they went to school in the United States and grew up with American values in their school, but Mexican values in their homes. For these participants, cultural resources were provided to them from their Mexican culture and the new Mexican American culture they have been exposed to. These cultural resources provide the participants agency to deploy different cultural tools to understand and make meaning of their multiple identities.

Based on the participants' experiences, even though they faced different challenges and obstacles coming to the United States, most of the participants reconstructed how they perceived certain values and traditions once they started living in the United States. Participants mention how culture and the media influenced how they construct meaning to different values and ideas they had while living in Mexico; they found new meaning after moving to the United States and the experiences that changed their perceptions. Living in the United States does not only help them re-construct values and traditions, but they create new meaning and values to important aspects of their Mexican identity, which, in turn, creates new meaning to who they are and how they perceive themselves.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we analyzed how combining Ann Swidler's "cultural toolkit" framework with an intersectionality theoretical approach the participants from this study make meaning and construct their identities living in Houston. In addition, this study analyzed how individuals actively select and deploy resources from multiple cultural toolkits towards constructing, negotiating, and performing multiple identities.

The role of culture and the construction of meaning are important to the understanding of the importance of the environment and the surroundings of individuals which in this case, provides participants with strategies of action to construct meaning. In this study, I analyzed the themes which emerged from the interviews with the participants, and based on these findings, I identified four themes among the interviews; family expectations, gender expectations, religion, and American culture. Based on the interviews, it was evident how these themes make an important part of the construction and the multiple cultural toolkits participants use to construct their multiple identities. It is important to understand how these specific themes the participants discussed were important and made an important part of the understanding of their identity and how they construct meaning. This provides an insight to the Mexican gay experience and the complexity in understanding the cultural meaning and intersecting identities in our society. As the abovementioned literature review confirms, sexuality among the Mexican culture has been a complicated and conservative topic to discuss due to the understanding of the Mexican culture as machista, patriarchal, homophobic, and conservative. With this said, it is evident how individuals are influenced by the Mexican culture and the cultural traditions.

In addition, this study also explored the various strategies of action that the participants employ and negotiated in the process of understanding their multiple identities, and doing so,

based on their unique experiences from the Mexican and American culture, reconstructed new meaning to different aspects of their identities. The interviewees' experiences revealed that Mexican gay men living in Houston do not just simply adapt to the understanding of their identity, they actively select and transform parts of their culture in a unique way using a vast variety of strategies of action. As we see in the findings, participants give different meanings to what it means to be Mexican gay men in Houston utilizing different cultural resources in unique ways.

The purpose of this project was to investigate Mexican gay men's' experiences in Houston, and through their stories gain new insights concerning how a double oppressed community navigates through challenges and constructs their identity. The investigation found that many of the participants faced challenges of acculturation and adaptation when they arrived in the US as children, in addition to cultural and religious values that challenged their sexuality. One of the greatest fears present among participants was family rejection due to the religious and traditional components of some of the participants' families. The few participants who talked about having a positive coming out experience were participants who were either second-generation Mexican or participants who had other gay members in their family. Like Swidler suggests culture can lead people to utilize assorted tools that contours individuals as active social actors leading them to construct unique strategies of action (2001). Some of the participants talked about how their parents were not "as religious" or as "traditional" as other Mexican families, living in the US had more liberal views and were more accepting of their sexual orientation.

During their experiences, participants navigated and reconstructed their values from their Mexican identity and were able to select and choose the values they wanted to keep as a

representation of their identity. Mexican gay men's unique tool kit consisted in part of their Mexican culture, American culture, and the gay culture. With the diverse cultural resources, the participants have, they are able to selectively integrate resources from the Mexican and American culture to uniquely construct their multiple identities. Through their vast cultural inventory, Mexican gay men are able to make sense of their environment and the different situations they face while constructing and embracing their multiple identities. Some of their participants mentioned how their identity was not simply defined as Mexican or gay; their identity was just them, without any labels to generalize a particular part of their identity reconstructing their identity navigating and reappropriating what it means to be Mexican and gay in the U.S.

CONCLUSION

This study takes a deeper look at culture from an intersectionality perspective analyzing the construction of meaning and identity among Mexican gay men. We were able to see how individuals utilize culture and construct their own unique realities based on their personal experiences. Interviewing participants gave me the opportunity to understand and see how culture works internally, and how individuals creatively utilize strategies of action to create meaning and construct their Mexican gay identity while living in Houston.

This study provides a more complex and unique understanding of how different intersecting identities such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, immigration, education, and social class connect in the construction of gay identities in Mexican gay men living in Houston. This study contributes to the literature in a very unique way of using culture and intersectionality. First, the study explores how individuals with multiple identities utilize their Mexican and American culture to navigate their intersectionality of identity formation living in Houston. I believe the findings of this research expand our understanding of how minorities who live in the United States manage their identities, and how cultural resources mediate to produce gay identities among Mexican men. In addition, this is the first-time Swidler's cultural tool kit approach and intersectionality have been used in a study to understand the meaning and the construction of identity among a specific group of individuals. Rather than researching how each part of Mexican gay men's identities works independently, this study focuses on how the different intersecting identities of Mexican gay men are best comprehended as a simultaneous social construction of their identity.

Interviewing Mexican gay men gave me the opportunity to understand how they navigate and reconstruct their understanding of masculinity and sexuality in unique complex ways.

During the study, the participants were asked to talk about their experiences living in Houston and how they understand and construct meaning employing various strategies of action. This study offers a more deliberate use of cultural sociology to highlight the important ways Mexican gay men draw from multiple cultural repertoires to negotiate intersecting identities. Cultural sociologists who ignore the intersection of identities and scholars who focus on intersectionality without identifying the creative ways vulnerable and oppressed groups retool their identities and self-images in empowering ways are missing a big part of the picture of what it means to be a sexual minority. Consequently, the goal of this study was to understand how creative uses of culture and intersectionality play crucial roles in how vulnerable individuals make sense out of their complex social environments to re-construct, navigate and re-tool their cultural resources based on their multiple identities and their re-construction of meaning.

It is helpful to underscore the importance of the political environment during this study. Even though this study did not focus on the impact of political views of the participants, many of the participants expressed how their Mexican identity provides them with an additional layer of marginalization in addition to dealing with their sexuality. Many of the participants talk about the importance of speaking up and being proud of their multiple identities living in Houston. Due to the recent pandemic of COVID-19, many of the political protests and social protests like pride have been postponed across the United States. Due to the changes this pandemic has created, groups have re-constructed their idea of rallies and protests and have created more virtual gathering and social support among communities. I believe this pandemic that has quarantined many of us for months, will have an important effect on how we provide meaning to different aspects of our society. Social media now serves as a virtual space for groups to meet, work, interact, and continue their daily routines without social contact.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Study Title: Experiences of Mexican Gay Men in Houston

Principal Investigator: Sandra E. Poblano

I am a Graduate Student at the University of Houston, in the Department of Sociology. I am planning to conduct a research study, which I invite you to take part in. This form has important information about the reason for doing this study, what we will ask you to do if you decide to be in this study, and the way we would like to use information about you if you choose to be in the study.

Why are you doing this study?

The purpose of the study is to understand the relationship between their Mexican and sexual identities while living in the United States.

What will I do if I choose to be in this study?

You will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview for about an hour. I will have about 20 questions for you asking about your experience as a Mexican Gay man living in Houston, Texas.

Study time: Study participation will take approximately 60 minutes.

Study location: All study procedures will take place at an agreeable location by all participants.

I would like to audio-record this interview to make sure that I remember accurately all the information you provide. I will keep these files in a secure location, and I will only use them. I may quote your remarks in presentations or articles resulting from this work. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity unless you specifically request that your true name identifies you.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life. You may be uncomfortable with some of the questions and topics we will ask about. If you are uncomfortable, you are free not to answer or to skip to the next question. As with all research, there is a chance that the confidentiality of the information we collect from you could be breached – we will take steps to minimize this risk, as discussed in more detail below in this form.

What are the possible benefits for me or others?

You are not likely to have any direct benefit from being in this research study. This study is designed to learn more about homosexuality in the Mexican community. The study results may be used to help other people in the future.

How will you protect the information you collect about me, and how will that information be shared?

The results of this study may be used in publications and presentations. Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If the results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used.

Consent

I have read this form, and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Name (printed)

Participant's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

Demographic Information Form

Instructions: Please provide a response for each of the following questions:

1. What is your age? _____

2. What is your marital status?

Single ☐ In a relationship ☐ Married ☐ Divorced. ☐

3. Education: Highest Level Attained

High School ☐ Some College ☐ College Graduate ☐ Post-Graduate Degree ☐

4. Occupation: _____

5. Were you born in the U.S? Yes ☐ No ☐

6. How long have you lived in the U.S? _____

7. Was your mother born in the U.S? Yes ☐ No ☐

8. Was your father born in the U.S? Yes ☐ No ☐

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about yourself.
 - a. Age, educational level, occupation, relationship status, pronouns
2. Where you grew up?
 - a. Tell me about your family?
 - b. Do you have any hobbies, shows, music you listen to and watch?
 - c. Anything else you want to share about yourself.
 - d. How often do you visit your family and Mexico?
 - e. What are the differences and similarities you see when you visit Mexico and Houston?
3. How is your relationship with your family?
 - a. How close are you with your parents?
4. How is your relationship with your friends?
 - a. What do you guys do for fun?
5. How long have you been aware of your sexual orientation?
 - a. How did you know what gay was?
 - b. Have you come out to your parents and friends?
6. How was your experience coming out to your family?
 - a. Were they supportive?
 - b. How did that make you feel?
7. Is there someone in your family who is experiencing "the most difficult" in accepting your sexuality?
 - a. If so, can you describe your relationship with them?

- b. How does that make you feel?
 - c. What is the reason it is so difficult for them?
- 8. After coming out, how has your life changed?
 - a. What aspects of your life specifically have changed?
 - b. Have you visited Mexico after coming out?
 - c. How has that experienced changed?
 - d. Positively or negatively?
- 9. How would you describe your feelings, beliefs, and thoughts about religion?
 - a. Did you grow up in a religious family?
 - b. Is your family still religious?
 - c. How so?
- 10. Do you believe your Mexican identity has changed being a gay man?
 - a. If so, how so?
 - b. Has it changed living in Houston?
 - c. Has your American identity changed being gay?
 - d. If so, in what ways?
- 11. How would you describe your relationship with the Mexican gay community in Houston?
 - a. Do you feel this community is supportive?
 - b. What are other ways you have formed connections in your community.
- 12. How is your relationship with the Mexican gay community in Mexico?
 - a. How is it different than Houston?
 - b. What similarities do you see in this community?
 - c. If there is no community, what do gay men do in Mexico?

13. In what places do you feel you have received support dealing with your sexuality?
 - a. Home, school, work, other places?
14. Have you experienced any negative or violent experiences based to your Mexican ethnicity?
 - a. What happened?
 - b. Do you know other people who have that are close to you?
15. Have you had any negative or violent experiences based on your sexual identity?
 - a. What happened?
 - b. Where did this occur?
16. How has your life changed after Donald Trump became president of the US?
 - a. How has it affected you and your family?
 - b. How has it affected your family in Mexico?
17. Is there anything else you'd like to add?
 - a. Is there anything I may have forgotten to ask about what you see as important to understand your experience?

APPENDIX D: TABLES AND GRAPHS

Table 1 Description of Participants in Mexican Gay Men Study

Name¹	Age	Nationality	Education	Occupation
Alberto	22	Mexico	High School	Student
Camilo	25	Mexico	High School	Dental Assistant
Enrique	21	American	High School	Student/ Intern
Felipe	25	Mexico	Law School	DA Attorney
Juan	22	Mexico	High School	Student/Mechanic
Luis	28	Mexico	Graduate School	Teacher
Leo	30	American	High School	Unemployed
Mario	29	Mexico	Graduate School	Teacher
Oscar	23	Mexico	High School	Student
Raul	23	Mexico	High School	Student
Antonio	26	Mexico	College Degree	Business Owner
Ivan	30	Mexico	High School	Cellphone Rep
Lorenzo	29	Mexico	High School	Insurance Rep
Gabriel	30	Mexico	Graduate School	Teacher
Omar	29	Mexico	Some College	Insurance Rep

¹ These names are not the participants' real names, pseudonyms were chosen by participants.

Characteristics of Participants

Participant (Alberto) was brought from Mexico by his parents along with his eleven-year-old brother at the age of 9 years old. He is currently a student at the University of Houston majoring in Marine Biology.

Participant (Camilo) came to the United States at the age of 12 years old with his mother. Camilo is currently working full-time as a dental assistant in Houston, he is planning to go back to school, but his financial situation has made it very difficult for him to continue his education.

Participant (Enrique) is 21 years old and was born in Del Rio, Texas. He is currently studying architecture at the University of Houston

Participant (Felipe) is 25 years old and was born in Mexico. He came to the United States with his parents and his brother at the age of 11 years old. He currently works as a Defense Attorney for the city of Houston.

Participant (Juan) is 22 years old and was born in Mexico. He came to the United States at the age of 9 years old along with his parents and five siblings. Juan is currently attending the University of Houston and works part-time for his father's car shop.

Participant (Luis) is 28 years old and was born in Mexico. Luis came to the United States along with his parents and two younger brothers when he was 9 years old. Luis is a high school teacher here in Houston and is in a committed relationship.

Participant (Leo) is 30 years old and was born and raised in Houston, Texas. Leo is a high school graduate and is currently unemployed. Leo is in a committed relationship and is very comfortable talking about his sexuality.

Participant (Mario) is 29 years old and was born in Mexico. Mario was brought to the United States as a teenager along with his three siblings, two brothers, and one sister. Mario is a high school teacher and is currently working on his master's degree.

Participant (Oscar) was born in Mexico. He is 23 years old and was brought to the United States by his parents and two siblings at the age of 11 years old. Oscar wants to pursue his singing career and move to New York or Los Angeles in the future.

Participant (Raul) is 23 years old and was born in Mexico. Raul immigrated to the United States along with his parents and sister at the age of 8 years old. Raul is an architect major at the University of Houston and is graduating this May.

Participant (Antonio) came to the United States at the age of 12 years old with his family. Antonio is currently working full-time in his father's company in Houston, he is planning to go back to school, to help his family manage the family business.

Participant (Ivan) came to the United States at the age of 19 years old with his family. Ivan is currently working full-time as a cellphone representative in Houston, he is planning to go back to school to obtain a short vocational career to improve his financial situation.

Participant (Lorenzo) came to the United States at the age of 20 years old with his mother. Lorenzo is currently working full-time as an insurance representative in Houston, he did not mention of any plans of going back to school or having any life changing events in the future.

Participant (Gabriel) came to the United States at the age of 26 years old with his family who lives in Houston. Gabriel is a full-time student in Houston Community College. He is planning to become a childcare specialist or teach elementary by the end of his short vocational career.

Participant (Omar) came to the United States at the age of 10 years old with his aunt and brothers. Omar is currently working full-time as an insurance representative in Houston. In addition, he is a full-time student at Houston Community College working on his accounting degree.